

7th Sunday in Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:12-14
<i>Response</i>	Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 27:1, 4, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 4:13-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord. I will come back to you, and your hearts will rejoice.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:1-11

The Seventh Sunday of Easter for Year A brings us to one of the most momentous passages in the Gospel of John, and that is the so-called High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17. This passage is unique for a number of reasons. The first of them is that it's the most extensive account of the prayer of Jesus anywhere in the Gospels. So for example, when the apostles ask Jesus, "Teach us how to pray," in Luke 11, he'll give them the, "Our Father..." But we don't ever see Jesus himself praying the Our Father, right? We do get brief accounts of his interior life, of his prayer life in the Garden of Gethsemane, at that climactic and unique moment there in the garden. But again, Matthew and Mark and Luke just give us a few snippets of lines of prayer that Jesus engages in. But when it comes to the Gospel of John in John 13-17, John's account of the Last Supper, the end of that famous Last Supper discourse between Jesus and the disciples in chapters 14-17, climaxes in this momentous, this extremely beautiful, elevated and in-depth account of Jesus's prayer to the Father on the cusp of his passion and death on the night of the Last Supper.

So it's very fitting as we are reflecting on the Gospel of John, reflecting on passages from the Last Supper discourse during the Easter season, where Jesus promises to send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, that the Church would take time to listen to the words of Jesus' prayer in John 17:1-11. The other aspect of this prayer that I would highlight here is its description as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. Most people have become familiar with this epithet for this particular section of the Gospel of John, although it's actually relatively recent in formulation. So as far as I'm able to tell, the first person to use this was actually a Lutheran theologian named David Chytraeus. He's living in the mid 16th century and he formulated this epithet of the High Priestly Prayer, because as you're going to see in just a moment, there are some priestly characteristics to Jesus' final prayer that echo activities of

the high priests in the Old Testament, especially in the account of Aaron on the Day of Atonement. So this is a unique window into the priestly identity of Jesus as well as a unique window into the prayer life of Jesus. So let's hear the words of the gospel with those preliminaries in mind, and then we'll try to unpack this beautiful prayer. John 17:1

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. "I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee.¹

Well, the first thing I want to say here is that's not the entire High Priestly Prayer. It actually goes on for another almost 20 verses to the end of chapter 17. So if you want to read the entire prayer, you have to read John 17:1-26 all the way through to the end. So it's a lengthy prayer, but that's the section that the Church selects for us today. So I'd like to highlight a few elements from it that are worthy of our attention. The first one is notice Jesus's posture of prayer. It says that he lifted his eyes up to heaven. This is something very standard in biblical postures of prayer. If you look at the Old Testament, you'll see there are several different postures for prayer that are customary. Kneeling is one you often see; prostration, full on the face is another; and then standing, those are the three ordinary biblical postures of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

prayer. But when engaged in those postures, especially while standing, it's also customary to raise either one's hand or one's eyes, or both to heaven as a way of coordinating the body with the interior disposition of the soul. And so this is an interesting passage because it will reappear, you'll hear echoes of it in the liturgy, in the Eucharistic Prayer number one, in the Roman Canon, it'll say, "With his eyes..." Something like, "With his eyes lifted to you, Almighty Father." That idea that Jesus lifts his eyes up to the Father when he's praying.

And so when the priest in the mass will lift his eyes up in the context of the Eucharistic prayer, that's a kind of physical conformity, by way of posture, to Christ himself, not in the words of institution at the Last Supper, but in this particular High Priestly Prayer from John 17. So just a little note there, it's interesting. It's interesting to me because sometimes we can forget that our bodily posture in prayer can aid our interior disposition in prayer because we're body-soul composites. It's not as if Jesus needed to lift up his eyes to God when he prays, but he does so and models for us the importance, I think, of aligning our physical posture with our interior posture of prayer. That's the first point that I want to highlight.

The second thing that is significant to highlight here is just the filial character of the prayer, right? So here, Jesus prays to God as the Son to the Father, right? The prayer is very... *filius* is the Latin word for son. So a filial prayer is one that really is expressly focused on Jesus's identity as the Son praying to the Father. So for example, he says,:

“Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him.

The third element of the prayer that I think would highlight is the emphasis on eternal life. It sums up the mission of Jesus, which is that he's come into the world to give eternal life to all whom you have given to him. And there's this beautiful line, "this is eternal life." What is eternal life? Jesus answered it, “that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” So this is something interesting about the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. Again, he describes eternal life, not primarily in terms of salvation from something bad like being saved from hell, for example, although that's important, but rather in terms of knowing the Father, knowledge of the Father, which means being drawn into the intimate and mutual love and knowledge that exists from all eternity between the Father and the Son. You'll see this elsewhere in the Gospels. The famous example

is Matthew 11:25-27, which is sometimes called the Johannine Thunderbolt, because in it, Jesus speaks in a way that sounds very similar to how he prays in the Gospel of John. So this is how the Thunderbolt reads:

All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

So what you see there is Jesus talking about the exclusive mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son. No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him. It's a kind of apocalyptic revelation of the mystery of the Trinity. It's actually very important. How can Jesus say no one knows the Father? I mean, did Moses not know the Father? Did David not know the Father? I mean, they all knew the one God of Israel. They knew the revelation of the Old Testament. Well, they did, but the mystery of the Trinity is a mystery that goes above and beyond that. And so what Jesus is doing in this High Priestly Prayer is actually describing eternal life as being brought into the life, the love, and in this case, the knowledge of the Trinity, that the Father and the Son share with one another from all eternity:

this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.

So he continues:

I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made.

What is that glory? That would be what theologians refer to as the preexistent glory of Christ. Because unlike other human beings, all other human beings, including Mary, who begin to exist at the moment of their conception in their mother's womb, they don't have existence before conception. Jesus has what theologians refer to as preexistence because the divine person of the son who is going to become incarnate and become man in the womb of Mary, the Virgin Mary, exists as God from all eternity, right? As son, he is the eternal son of the Father who is eternally begotten of the Father, who has the glory of God because he is God, God the son from all eternity. He's not a creature. He's not like one of us who was made in time and space. He's a divine person who in the incarnation assumes a human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary at the time of the incarnation. So

here, what Jesus is doing is he's actually praying to be glorified by the Father with the preexisting glory he had before the world was made. Not only before he came into the world, but before creation itself existed.

So you can see this is a very deep, a very rich Trinitarian prayer. In this final prayer, Jesus is in a sense drawing the disciples at the Last Supper and then through them drawing us as well through this reading into the mystery of his relationship with the Father that he's had from all eternity, and the glory that he's had with the Father, which is nothing other than the eternal love that the Father and the Son have shared with one another. A love that is so real, we identify that mutual love itself as the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit of God. But Jesus doesn't mention the Holy Spirit in the verses we're just reading here, but you can see the Trinitarian dimension, nonetheless, of this beautiful and powerful prayer, right? So much here that you can meditate on.

For our purposes here though, I just want to highlight, I'd like to emphasize the priestly character of the prayer in two key ways. First of all, you'll notice it doesn't use the word priest. So you might be thinking, "Why is this called the High Priestly Prayer?" And the answer to that question is the reason it's called the High Priestly Prayer is because Jesus is not just praying for himself. He's not just praying to the Father, but he is interceding for himself and for the apostles, and eventually for the whole world if you read the entire prayer all the way down through to the end. And this pattern, this threefold pattern of intercession, scholars have actually shown reflects the prayer of the high priest on the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament in the book of Leviticus.

So let me just highlight a couple of elements for you here. The first thing I would highlight, it actually isn't in the reading today, but I'll bring it up anyway just to give you a sense of what the prayer is all about. In John 17:17, when Jesus continues to pray, he goes on to pray for the apostles. He intercedes for the apostles. And in that verse 17 and verse 19, he says:

Sanctify them

meaning sanctify the apostles

in the truth; thy word is truth.

And then again in verse 19, he says:

for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.

Now the Greek word here for sanctify or consecrate, *hagiazō*, means to make holy. Right? So if you consecrate something, you make it sacred, you make it holy. Well, this verb, *hagiazō*, is the exact verb that's used in the Old Testament to describe priestly ordination. Very interesting, priestly ordination. For example, in the Book of Exodus 29:1, in the ancient Greek translation, we read these words:

“Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them...

hagiazō in Greek

...that they may serve me as priests.”

So the same word Jesus here is using with reference to himself, “I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated”, is the word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe to the consecration or ordination of sons of Aaron to be priests. So those verses which aren't in the reading for today, is one of the foundations for why this prayer is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. He's speaking of himself as one who has been consecrated, or you could actually translate it almost as ordained, right? Made holy, set apart as a priest, and of his disciples as those who have been consecrated or made priests in the truth. And you might be thinking, "Well, wait, when were they made priests?" Well, if we have more time, I could look at the fact that he's done this at the Last Supper itself. The church has interpreted the words of institution, "Do this in memory of me," as the consecration or the ordination, the moment when Jesus consecrates the apostles to be the priests of the new covenant, to offer the sacrifice of the new covenant. So we see echoes of that here as well.

The other reason it's called a High Priestly Prayer is that if you look at the whole prayer for today, and not just the reading for today, there are parallels with the intercessory prayers, the Priestly Prayers of Aaron in the Old Testament on the Day of Atonement. So if you look for a second, I've got a chart here that can help you see these parallels. So if you look in the Old Testament on the Day of Atonement, in the book of Leviticus 16, it says that the high priests on the Day of Atonement sacrifices “for himself.” And if you look at the New Testament, the prayer of Jesus in John 17, Jesus explicitly prays...he begins by praying for himself in verses 1 and 5.

Second, in the Old Testament, if you go back to the Day of Atonement, the high priest doesn't just sacrifice "for himself", he also sacrifices "for his house", meaning his family. So the Aaronic family in Leviticus 16:11,17, he offers an intercessory prayer and sacrifice for his house. The same thing's true if you look at the New Testament, the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus doesn't just pray for himself, he also prays for his apostles, for his disciples. John 17:9, "I am praying for them," he says in the verses we heard from today.

And then finally, in the Old Testament, the high priest doesn't just pray for himself and for his house, for his priestly sons, he also prays for the people of Israel. He prays for the whole assembly. In verse 17, he prays and sacrifices for "the assembly." And then finally, Jesus in the High Priestly Prayer also prays, "also for those who will believe in me through their word." This is in John 17:21,22. It's not in the reading again for today, it's at the end of the prayer. But Jesus goes on to pray not just for himself, not just for the apostles, but for everyone who will believe through the apostles, namely for the Church. And so because of these prayers, these parallels between the Old Testament and the New Testament, several scholars, including one you might be familiar with, Pope Benedict XVI in his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, has highlighted these parallels as a way of showing that what's taking place... Here's the neat upshot. What's taking place in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17 is that Jesus is not only fulfilling the Jewish Passover in the sacrifice, in the actions and words at the Last Supper and his sacrifice on the cross, he's also fulfilling the Jewish Day of Atonement.

So he's gathering up both the Feast of Passover into his passion, death and resurrection through the words and the Passover at the Last Supper... And he's gathering up the kind of prayer and sacrifice and intercession that you see from the Jewish Day of Atonement into his Paschal mystery as well. So it's like he's taking each thread of the Old Testament, all the different feasts of the Old Testament are being fulfilled in Christ, in his passion, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. And you might recall the Day of Atonement was of course the annual feast, once a year in the Jewish calendar, where the high priests would offer a sacrifice for all the sins that the people of Israel had committed during that one year in order to atone, to reconcile the entire people with God on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement or the day of covering, you could translate it, when the sins of the people are covered over. So as Pope Benedict shows, and I'd highly encourage you to read that second volume, there's a beautiful chapter on the High Priestly Prayer, by means of this prayer, Jesus is in a sense fulfilling another aspect of the law and the prophets, the Old Testament and the Day of Atonement. And you don't have to read Benedict to, if you'd like, I have a course called *The Bible and the*

Mass. It's a full class where I take you through how Jesus doesn't just fulfill Passover or the Day of Atonement, but how he, through his words and his actions, fulfills all seven of the major festivals of the Old Testament liturgical calendar: Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Trumpets. All those liturgies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. So you might check that out if you want to go into more depth because it's really powerful and it's really beautiful.

So for our purposes here, though, we're going to go back to the first reading for today and bring our study of the High Priestly Prayer to a close by looking at the other readings. These are fairly straightforward. As is often the case during the Easter season, we don't go back to the Old Testament for first reading, we read from the Book of Acts. And here we just see a brief window into the apostolic college, to the presence of the Twelve after the resurrection, when it says, Acts 1:12:

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away; and when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.

So here we have a list of the Twelve, and I think the reason the Church gives us this is twofold. First, to continue during the Easter season, looking at what the early Church was like after the resurrection. And then secondly, it correlates somewhat with the High Priestly Prayer because one of the principle objects of Jesus's prayer in the gospel for today is that he prays for the disciples, he prays for the apostles, he prays for the apostolic college. And that one of the graces that he obtains for them in that prayer that is very powerful is:

I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them

And then, unfortunately, there's an aspect of the verse that the lectionary left out. It's really crucial but I'll tell you. At the end of verse 11 when he says, "they are in the world," he says:

Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

So what Jesus does is he prays for the unity of the apostles after his death and resurrection. The unity of the Church is one of the principle desires of Jesus' heart during this High Priestly Prayer in John 17. And I think that's powerful to think that on the cusp of his passion and death, there's so many things that Jesus could be praying for, but one of them is he prays for the unity of the apostles and for the unity of the Church, that they might be one, that we might be one even as he and the Father are one. So he's praying for the unity that takes place within the Trinity to be present in the Church itself. And that should be the prayer of all of us as well, for unity in the church.

All right, in closing then I'd like to just...the Psalm for today is Psalm 27. It's a Psalm about the desire to live in the temple, to be in the house of the Lord, to see the good things of the Lord. And I think the Church probably chooses it because John 17 is a Priestly Prayer, kind of reflects the identity of Jesus as the priest. And where do priests offer prayer and sacrifice? Well, they do it in the temple. They do it in the house of the Lord. And then also because the new temple in the early Church will of course be the community itself, the apostles themselves when they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. All right. So much more that could be said about the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. I will end with this quote from the Catechism. You can reflect on this as you're praying with the readings for today. Paragraph 2746 says this:

When “his hour” came, Jesus prayed to the Father. *His prayer, the longest transmitted by the Gospel, embraces the whole economy of creation and salvation, as well as his death and Resurrection.* The prayer of the Hour of Jesus always remains his own, just as his Passover “once for all” remains ever present in the liturgy of his Church. *Christian Tradition rightly calls this prayer the “priestly” prayer of Jesus. It is the prayer of our high priest, inseparable from his sacrifice, from his passing over (Passover) to the Father to whom he is wholly “consecrated.”* In this Paschal and sacrificial prayer, everything is recapitulated in Christ: God and the world; the Word and the flesh; eternal life and time; the love that hands itself over and the sin that betrays it; the disciples present and those who will believe in him by their word; humiliation and glory. *It is the prayer of unity.* (CCC 2476-49)

So the Catechism there I think says something that's really powerful, that in a sense, it's not only the words of institution or the mystery of the Eucharist that's made present every time the Church celebrates the liturgy. In a very real sense, it's also the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus that is coming to us, that we are in a sense

participating in every time we celebrate the Church's liturgy. And I in particular, for what it's worth, see this very palpably expressed whenever a priest prays the Eucharistic prayer and he does indeed lift his eyes up, rightly, when he raises his eyes to heaven. It helps me to remember that it's not just the words of institution that we are in a sense participating in at the liturgy, it's also in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus Christ.